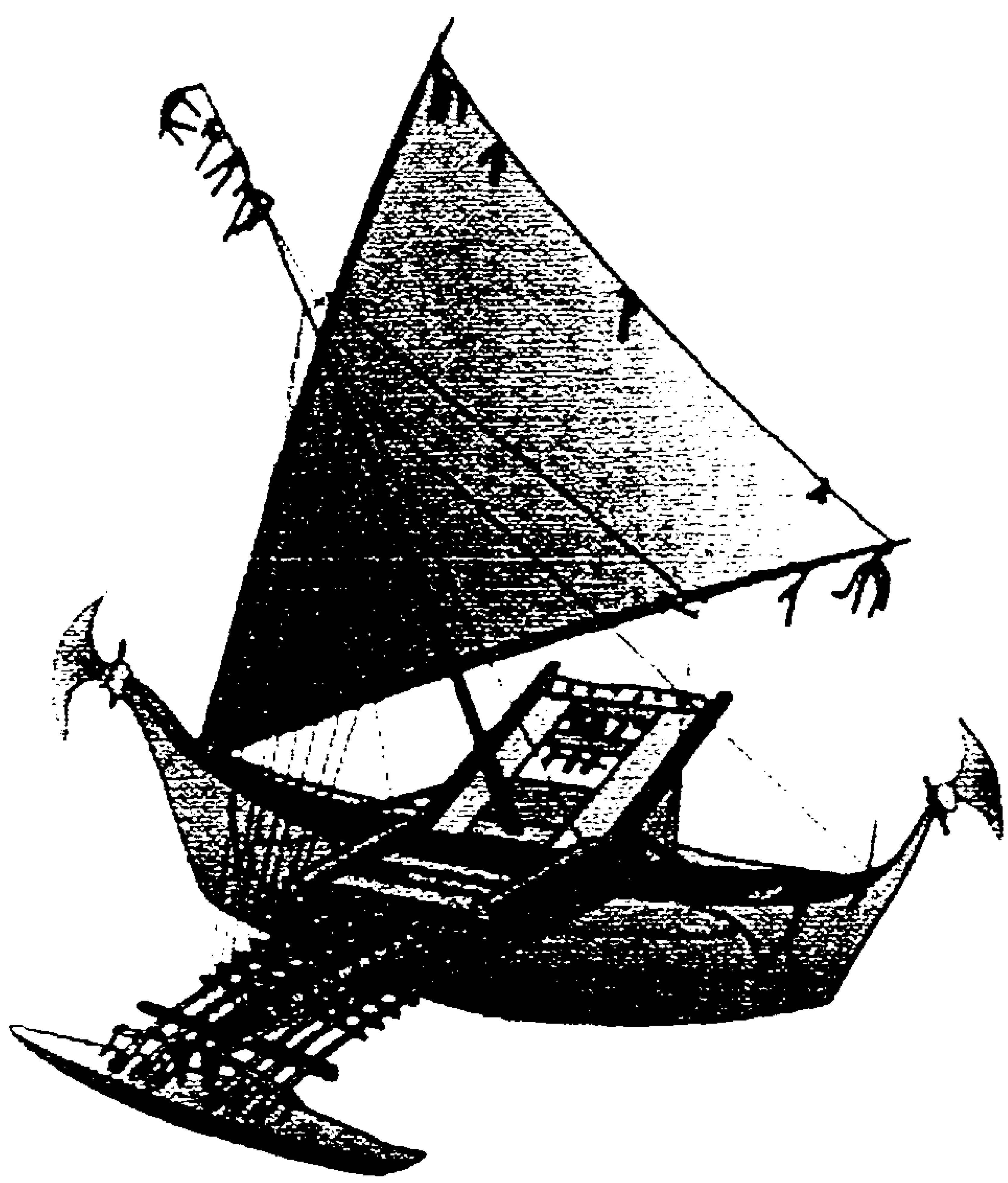
Archaeology and Language III

Artefacts, languages and texts



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ROUTLEDGE

ONE WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY

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9 *From artifacts to peoples: Pelasgoi, Indo-Europeans, and the arrival of the Greeks*

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INTRODUCTION

Ancient authors agree that the first Greeks who arrived in the Aegean displaced a race known as *Pelasgoi*. This race cannot be defined archaeologically, as the written sources do not describe any 'Pelasgian' artefacts that could be identified in the archaeological record. On the other hand, ancient sources provide some information on the social, political, economic and religious institutions of the Pelasgoi, which could be used in identifying them with one of the prehistoric cultures of the Aegean. Archaeological research in the last twenty years has made significant contributions towards a better understanding of the social, economic, political, and religious processes of the Stone and Bronze Age cultures of the Aegean, which could be compared to Pelasgian processes, as these are known from the ancient literature.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORIES

Archaeological interest in the Early Bronze Age inhabitants of Greece goes back to Gordon Childe (1915, 1926), who suggested that they were not Greeks. Childe thought that the first Greeks were the bearers of the MH Minyan pottery and that they came to Greece at the end of the third millennium BC. The main argument was based on the ancient Greek sources, according to which Greece was first inhabited by several non-Greek peoples, the most important of which were the *Pelasgoi*. Linguistic studies (see below) had demonstrated that a large number of place names and words in the vocabulary of Greek had foreign etymologies; these were explained as survivals of an earlier language. After Childe, Harland (1923) and Haley and Blegen (1928: 152) suggested that the pre-Greek names should be associated with the Early Bronze Age and that the Greeks arrived at the turn of the second millennium. This theory has found wide acceptance and been supported by several scholars.

Its most ardent supporter has been Marija Gimbutas (1968, 1970, 1972, 1973a, 1973b, 1974, 1979, 1980), who associates the first Indo-Europeans with the bearers of the Corded Ware and *Kurgan* ('burial mound') culture of the Balkans. These are supposed to have wandered from their homeland (somewhere in south Russia) and to have caused a series of destructions in the Aegean and East Mediterranean at the end of the Early Bronze 2. Gimbutas considered the Early Bronze 2 inhabitants of Greece to be non-Indo-European (Gimbutas 1974: 132). Following the same line of argument, Caskey (1960, 1971) argued for a general destruction of the Early Helladic EH II settlements at the end of the Early Bronze 2, but was more hesitant to associate it with the arrival of the Greeks.

A different theory has been put forward by Renfrew (1987), who criticizes previous attempts to identify ethnicities with artifactual assemblages. He draws attention to the fact that *patterns in the processes, and not the artifacts* can help us identify different ethnic units (Renfrew 1987: 23–24, 120–21; 1988: 438). He links 'the spread of early Indo-European languages to a well defined demographic process itself closely correlated with the adoption of a farming economy' (Renfrew 1987: 266). Following an opinion he had expressed earlier (1974), he suggests that the Indo-European tribes started their expansion during the Neolithic period from a homeland in Anatolia. According to his theory, the Early Bronze Age inhabitants of Greece were not only Indo-Europeans but indeed Greeks. Renfrew's suggestions about an Anatolian homeland and a dispersion during the Neolithic have been heavily criticised (Anthony and Wailes, 1988; Gimbutas 1988), as were his linguistic analyses (Baldi 1988; Coleman 1988), and his model for dispersion (Barker 1988). What Renfrew was able to do, however, was to demonstrate that the arrival of the Greeks did not necessarily happen as a sudden and massive invasion by fierce conquerors (we shall return later to the idea of a migration in the form of a *process* rather of an event). Besides Renfrew, French (1974: 51) considers it possible that the Early Bronze Age Aegean was inhabited by Greeks.

Linguistic studies played a major role in establishing the languages of the prehistoric Aegean populations. Kretschmer suggested that before the Indo-European Greeks arrived in the Aegean the area was populated by two substrata: a non-Indo-European and a proto-Indo-European. He considered that the non-Indo-European population had come from Anatolia, and their linguistic characteristic was the suffix *-ss/tt-* (Kretschmer 1932: 92); the proto-Indo-European population had come from the north, and their language included the suffix *-nth-* (Kretschmer 1953: 190–91).

Kretschmer's ideas found wide acceptance and became the source of two theories. The first theory accepted only Kretschmer's non-Indo-European population and rejected the existence of a proto-Indo-European element. Fick (1905) was the first to collect the pre-Greek place names which, based on Kretschmer (1896), he considered to be non-Indo-European. Haley and Blegen's suggestions were largely based on Fick and the earlier work of Kretschmer. Later, Schachermeyr (1955, 1967, 1972) suggested that the

Palaeolithic, Neolithic and Early Bronze 1–2 inhabitants of Greece were not Indo-European but belonged to the so-called Mediterranean substratum. This theory relied on the fact that some non-Greek names of gods and heroes, several place names, and words with the suffixes *-nth* and *-ss/-ttare* were distributed over a wide area of the Mediterranean; in some of these places the Indo-Europeans did not arrive. Schachermeyr (1972: 14) accepted that the first Greeks arrived at the end of Early Bronze 2.

The second theory was put forward by Georgiev (1966, 1972, 1974; following Windekens 1952, 1960), who accepts Kretschmer's proto-Indo-European population and denies the non-Indo-European element. This theory grew out of linguistic analysis of the non-Greek words surviving in the Greek vocabulary and a better knowledge of Indo-European grammar and vocabulary. According to this theory, the words previously considered to be Mediterranean have an Indo-European, non-Greek etymology. Georgiev proposes that the Pelasgoi were the Neolithic inhabitants of Greece and associates them with the pre-Greek place names of the central and south Aegean (Georgiev 1974: 249). He accepts an influx of Hittite or Luvian population in the beginning of the Early Bronze Age; this population was finally absorbed by the Pelasgoi. In Crete the Eteocretans are associated with Luvians (ibid.: 251).

The linguistic theories depend largely on the date of the differentiation of the Indo-Europeans. If we accept that the Indo-European languages were already differentiated by the end of the fourth millennium BC, it is possible that the Early Bronze Age Aegean was inhabited by proto-Greeks; if not, it is likely that the population was not Indo-European (Crossland 1974: 10–11).

THE PELASGOI IN THE ANCIENT LITERATURE

The basis of our knowledge about the pre-Greek population of the Aegean is rooted in the ancient writers, who mention twelve peoples in the area before the arrival of the Greeks. Except for the Pelasgoi, the information about these peoples is scanty: we know that they were associated with certain regions (Sakellariou 1974: map on p. 369), but we do not know their chronological relationship. The etymological analysis of their names has shown that some of them may have been Indo-European (Sakellariou, 1974, 365–71).

The Pelasgoi were considered by the ancient sources to have been the main pre-Greek population of the Aegean. Their ethnic identity is, however, disputed. Based on various interpretations of the literary evidence they have been identified with a number of different ethnic groups, including Aones, Carians, Caukones, Dryopians, Haimones, Hyantes, Pelasgoi (all the foregoing possibly Indo-European), Ektenes, Kylikranes, Leleges, Phoenicians and Tyrrhenians (Sakellariou 1974), as well as Illyrians (Lochner-Hüttenbach 1960) and Semites (Astour 1969; Bernal 1987).

The economic, social, political, and religious processes of the Pelasgoi can be reconstructed as follows. The ancient sources agree unanimously that

Pelasgian economy was based entirely on agriculture: the Pelasgoi were the first to establish permanent settlements, to cultivate cereals, to improve nutrition and to invent new agricultural techniques (there is no information about stock raising). They manufactured clothing and invented spinning and weaving. They were not associated with trade or technology, and there is no indication that they used metals.

Their social organisation shows no differentiation according to wealth, sex, or professional status and no indication of craft specialisation. The core of the Pelasgian society appears to have been the family. Although there is no real evidence, it is possible that their social institutions included the Indo-European custom of marriage by capture.

The religious institutions of the Pelasgoi seem to have undergone a long development. At the beginning they are said to have worshipped gods with no individual names; later, they gave names to their gods. A principal deity seems to have been a goddess of agriculture and fertility, and the Pelasgoi are associated with the cult of a goddess that was later identified with Demeter. They may have observed fertility rites, in which ithyphallic images were used. It is also likely that they worshipped a household/family deity, later identified with Hera or Eilythia. Finally, the worship of a dominant male god may be suggested, at least for Dodona – although this may be a later introduction.

The institutions of the Pelasgian culture are summarised in Table 9.1. The Pelasgian history, as evidenced by the sources, can be reconstructed as follows. Their original geographical distribution seems to have covered north Greece from Thessaly to Epiros, the Peloponnese, and the Cyclades. Until the arrival of the Greeks they seem to have lived in peace; the first Greeks were few and gradually expelled the Pelasgoi from central and south Greece. Then the Pelasgoi fled to Thessaly, where other Pelasgian settlements had been unaffected by the Greek intrusion. With the coming of more Greeks, they were either assimilated or expelled and migrated to Crete, the north-east Aegean, and west Anatolia. The Pelasgoi of the islands were expelled by Carians, who arrived after the Greeks and stayed in the islands until Minos defeated them.

Table 9.1 Pelasgian culture processes

Economy	*Political organisation*	*Social organisation*	*Religion*
Agriculture Stock raising No specialisation	Tribes/kings	Family No hierarchy	Household goddess Fertility goddess Male god? Ithyphallic statues

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Previous research has shown that the Greeks had already arrived in Greece in Early Bronze 3, and it has been generally accepted that the pre-Greek population lived in the Neolithic and the Early Bronze 1 and Early Bronze 2 (Cosmopoulos 1991, which has further references). A reconstruction of the culture processes of the Early Bronze 2 (Table 9.2) suggests that the Pelasgoi could not be identified with the Early Bronze 2 population of Greece.

Comparison of Tables 9.1 and 9.2 will reveal that the Pelasgoi had different economic, political, and social institutions from the people who lived in Early Bronze 2 Greece. In general, their culture seems less complex than the Early Bronze 2 culture. The only similarities are in the cult of fertility deities and in the presence of family as the basic social unit. Both are, however, features that outlast the Greek Bronze Age and could not be considered defining criteria. The social, economic, and political differences are more pronounced, and it is reasonable to suggest that the Pelasgoi were *not* the dominant population in Early Bronze 2 Aegean.

How can the Pelasgoi be dated? Since the Pelasgoi were the pre-Greek population, they cannot have lived after Early Bronze 3, by which time the Greeks seem to have been already present. As they cannot be dated to the Early Bronze 2 either, we should consider an even earlier period. Early Bronze 1 would be a good candidate, except that it is a short, more or less transitional period without any marked characteristics. The Neolithic, on the other hand, seems to correspond better to the characteristics of the Pelasgoi (establishment of permanent settlements, agriculture, ithyphallic images). The identification of the Pelasgoi with the Neolithic population of Greece has been suggested before (Vermeule 1964), but it was assumed that they continued to be the sole population of Greece in Early Bronze 1 and Early Bronze 2. This reasoning was based on the assumption that the Greeks came to Greece as fierce conquerors and destroyers and their arrival had to be identified with a break in the continuity of the material culture (Caskey 1960). But did it really happen this way?

The ancient sources clearly state that the first Greeks were few and gradually infiltrated the Aegean; nowhere is there mention of an invasion. Renfrew suggests that the arrival of the Greeks was a process and not an event, and this is corroborated not only by the literary but also by the archaeological

Table 9.2. Early Bronze 2 culture processes

Economy	*Political organisation*	*Social organisation*	*Religion*
Agriculture Stock raising Metallurgy Crafts Trade	Chiefdom Stratification Specialisation	Family or clan	Household goddess Fertility goddess Phallic cult Bull cult

evidence. The transition from the Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age was not marked by destructions: it was rather a gradual transition, when dislocations of settlements took place (Treuil 1983: 112). The Late Neolithic sites of central and south Greece, the islands, and north-west Anatolia were abandoned and reoccupied in the Early Bronze 2 (ibid.). The only areas not affected were Thessaly and north Greece, where Neolithic habitation continued (ibid. 112–14). We must acknowledge that the Neolithic period was very long, and it would be very difficult to document population changes.

CONCLUSION

The Neolithic inhabitants of Greece could be identified with the Pelasgoi. At the end of the Neolithic and the beginning of the Early Bronze Age, especially Early Bronze I, some changes seem to have taken place in the Aegean world. It is possible that there was a population movement from Anatolia that could perhaps be identified with the Carian arrival on the islands. We know from the ancient sources that the Carians expelled the Pelasgoi from the islands during the Early Bronze Age and *after* the first Greeks had arrived. It is, therefore, possible that the earliest Greeks gradually infiltrated the area during Early Bronze I. Carians and Greeks – both Indo-European peoples with knowledge of metallurgy and with more complex economic, social, and political organisation (cf. Treuil 1983: 515) – gradually took over the indigenous population, without an invasion or destructions.

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